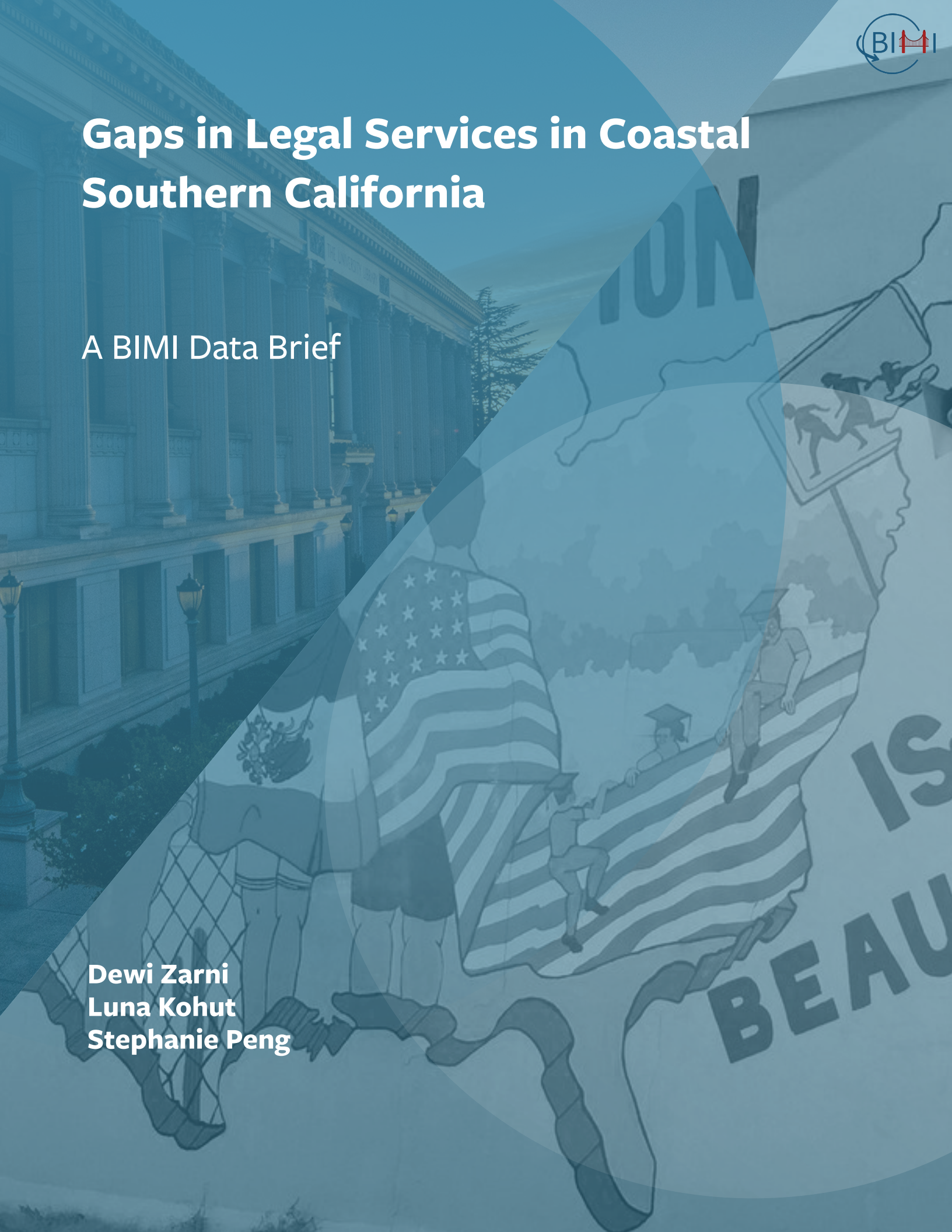


# Gaps in Legal Services in Coastal Southern California

A BIMI Data Brief

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# Gaps in Legal Services in Coastal Southern California

The Coastal Region of Southern California, made up of San Diego county, Los Angeles county, and Orange county, is home to nearly 17 million people. Two and a half million of these people, 15% of the region's total population, are noncitizens.<sup>1</sup> Noncitizens often require assistance navigating the complicated, time-consuming, and costly immigration legal system in order to obtain work permits, seek counsel in removal proceedings, apply for residency or citizenship and more. Lack of accessible legal services therefore impacts immigrant populations' social and civic inclusion, as well as the wellbeing of families and communities as a whole.

Given the large population of noncitizens in Southern California, there is an imperative need for legal services that are geographically, economically and culturally accessible. Much of the noncitizen population requires language and financial assistance in order to navigate legal processes. Over 50% of noncitizens in Southern California, or nearly 1.5 million people, have limited English language skills. Noncitizens also experience poverty at a higher rate than the general population. While 13.4% of Los Angeles county residents live below 150% of the poverty level, the respective rate for noncitizens is 19.2%. Similarly, in Orange county and San Diego county, the noncitizen poverty rate is 6.2 and 9.3 percentage points higher than the general population rate, respectively.

In this region of Coastal Southern California, our research identified 73 immigrant-focused legal aid offices that offer free or low-cost services. Looking at the 28 cities with a low-income foreign-born population of at least 8,000, we found an average of 0.75 legal clinics per 10,000 low-income foreign-born individuals. In comparison, BIMl's research on California's Central Valley

and Bay Area revealed a higher prevalence of clinics. The Central Valley had 1.03 clinics per 10,000 low income immigrants,<sup>2</sup> and the Bay area had 2.1.<sup>3</sup>

The Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) mapped immigrant-serving legal aid providers in relation to immigrant demand for legal aid across coastal Southern California to identify the most pressing gaps in access. To identify demand, we used American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau to map where low-income foreign-born individuals live. The map in Figure 1 shows the 28 cities in Orange, San Diego, and Los Angeles Counties with more than 8,000 low-income foreign-born residents. The size of each circle indicates the number of low-income foreign-born residents in each city; a larger circle indicates a higher demand for legal service providers. The accessibility of legal services in the city is shown by the color, which corresponds to the number of legal service providers per 10,000 low-income foreign-born residents. Dark purple circles are cities with a higher ratio of legal service providers per low-income foreign-born residents; bright orange circles are those with very few legal service providers **in proportion to the number of low-income and foreign-born residents**. Figure 2 ranks cities by the prevalence of offices per 10,000 low-income foreign-born residents. With this information, local stakeholders, including policymakers and philanthropists, can work to meet the needs of these underserved communities.

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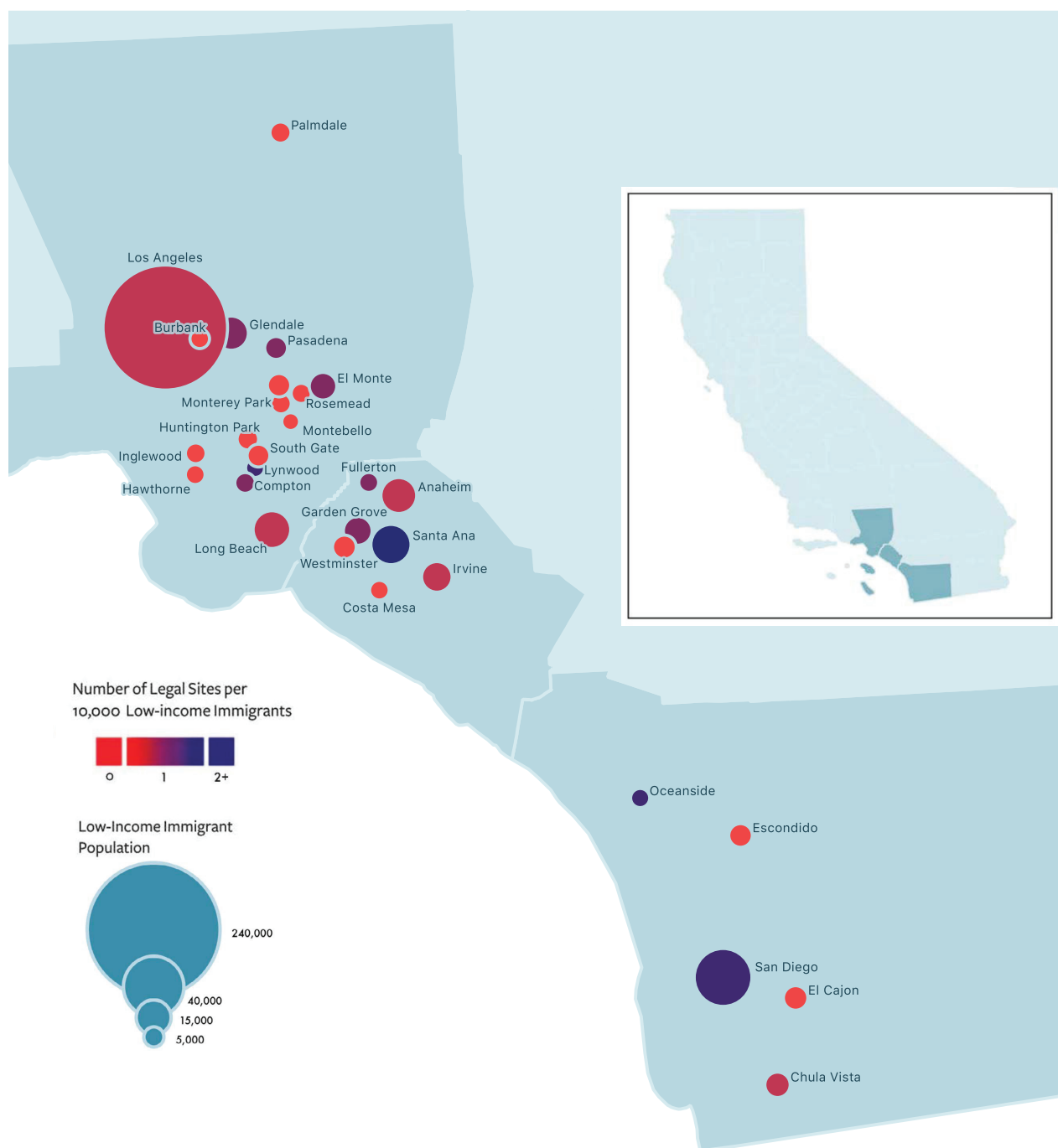
<sup>1</sup> All demographic information is from the American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

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<sup>2</sup> Natsoulis, Alizée, & Slootjes, Jasmijn. 2020. "Gaps in Legal Services for Immigrants in the Central Valley". Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

<sup>3</sup> Plant, Carl., Natsoulis, Alizée, & Slootjes, Jasmijn. 2020. "Gaps in Legal Services for Immigrants in the Bay Area". Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

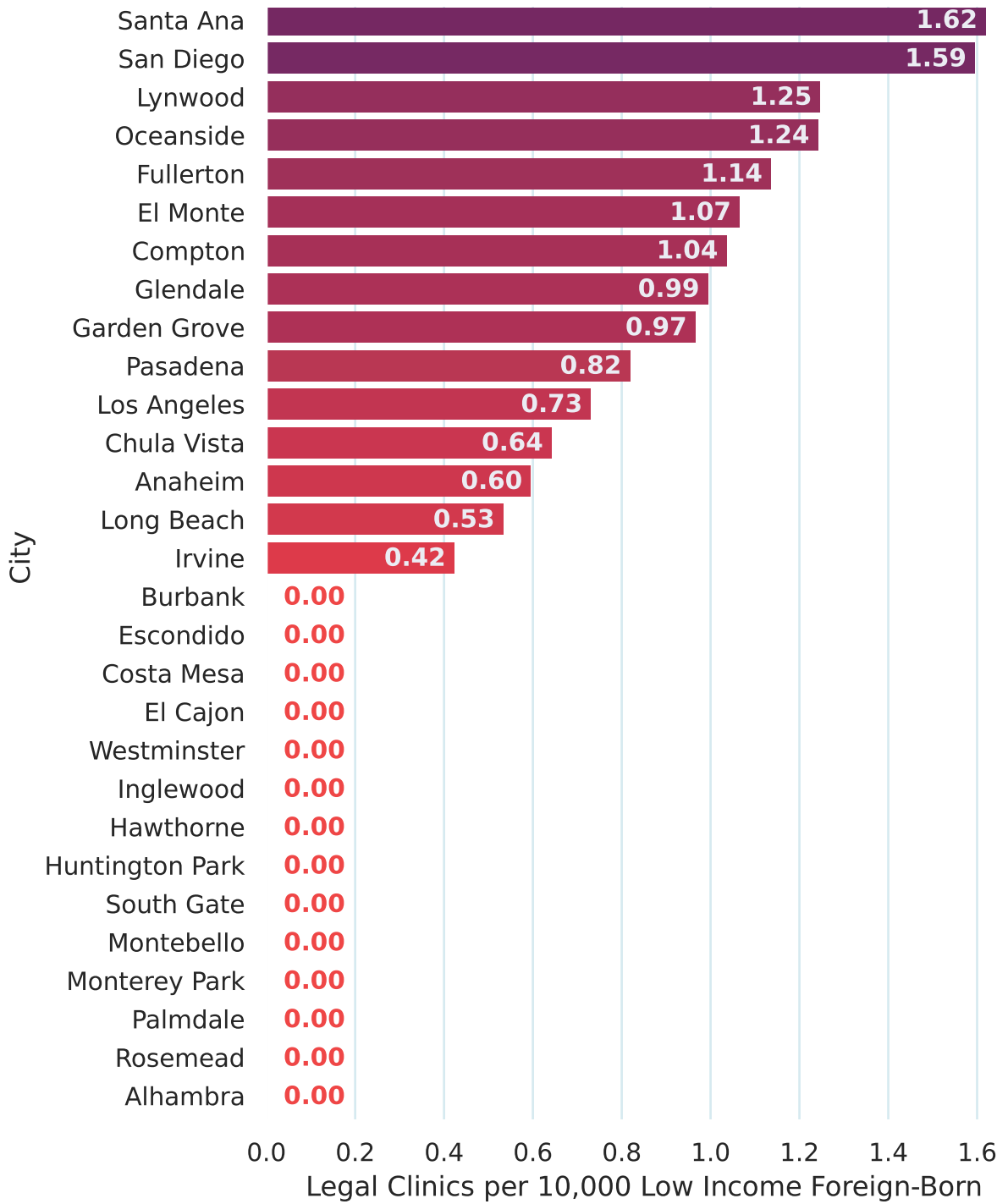




**Figure 1: Legal Aid Services Accessibility in Coastal Southern California**

This map shows 28 cities in Coastal Southern California with at least 8,000 foreign-born residents living below 150% of the poverty line. The circle sizes are proportional to the total low-income immigrant population, and the colors correspond to the number of legal clinics per 10,000 low-income immigrant residents.

Data Sources: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates, the Immigration Advocates Network Nonprofit Resource Center, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and The United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review.



**Figure 2: Ranking of Southern California Coast Cities by Number of Legal Service Offices per 10,000 Low-Income Foreign-Born Residents**

This chart ranks the 28 coastal Southern California cities with the largest numbers of low-income foreign-born residents (greater than 8,000). For each city, the number of legal clinics per 10,000 low-income foreign-born residents is shown.

Data Sources: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates, the Immigration Advocates Network Nonprofit Resource Center, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and The United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review.





## Summary of Key Findings

- Two of the region's larger cities, **Santa Ana and San Diego, have the highest access** to legal services.
- **Many of the suburbs of LA County have no legal aid clinics**, and **the city of Los Angeles itself only has 0.73 legal aid clinics** per 10,000 low-income foreign-born.
- Of the 13 cities with zero legal service providers and over 10,000 low income foreign born, 9 are located in LA County.
- LA, Orange, and San Diego Counties contain **a much denser and higher population of low-income foreign-born residents** than Bay Area and Central Valley counties (thus, the 8,000 low-income foreign-born population “threshold” for cities to be shown on the map).

## Key Comparisons Between Health<sup>1</sup> and Legal Service Access

- Santa Ana city in Orange County stands out as offering high access to legal services, but poor access to health services. In general, immigrants living in Orange County appear to have slightly better access to legal services than health services.
- By contrast, immigrants living in LA County have relatively poor access to legal services compared to health clinics.
- San Diego city's access to legal services is one of the best in the region, which mirrors its similarly high accessibility to health clinics.

<sup>5</sup> Kohut, Luna and Stephanie Peng. 2021. “Gaps in Health Services for Immigrants in Coastal Southern California.” BIMl Data Brief Series. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

**0.75** legal aid offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants, on average

## Areas for Further Study

Further research is needed. First, using cities as the unit of analysis, especially in larger cities, might overlook important variation in service capacity between neighborhoods within a large city. A provider near the edge of a city boundary might also serve residents in numerous cities. Second, the presence of providers does not necessarily mean that they effectively reach low-income immigrant populations. This brief highlights the differences in possible capacity across place, not immigrants' actual use of services.

Last, when comparing larger and smaller cities, this analysis is unable to look at the variation in capacity of different providers. Possibly, in places with high demand, providers may have more staff, longer hours, and more services. Rather than increase the number of providers, some places might increase the capacity of existing providers. Our mapping of service accessibility is a first step to beginning these conversations on how to ensure the safety and well-being of our immigrant neighbors.

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## About the Authors

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Dewi Zarni is a BIMl Undergraduate Research Fellow and an American Studies major at UC Berkeley, concentrating in the intersection of immigration and criminal justice. She has previously interned with East Bay Sanctuary Covenant's Refugee Rights program and a local immigration attorney. Her current research work for BIMl includes the Mapping Spatial Inequality project and Amplifying Sanctuary Voices Oral History project on climate migration.

Luna Kohut studies Global Studies and Sociology with a minor in Russian Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. She worked with BIMl for over a year as an undergraduate research fellow conducting research for the Mapping Spatial Inequality Project.

Stephanie Peng is a Political Science PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley. She is a graduate student researcher with the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative, working on the Mapping Spatial Inequality Project. Stephanie has previously worked at the U.S. Immigration Policy Center (USIPC) and her research interests are centered around the political representation and integration of immigrants.